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Central America Aid Approved by Senate

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The Republican-controlled Senate, resisting to the end any significant restriction on President Reagan's policy in Central America, yesterday gave him a major victory by approving almost \$62 million in emergency military aid for El Salvador and \$21 million to help rebels fighting the government of Nicaragua.

"We have reaffirmed our policy there which has for five out of seven years been a bipartisan one," said Majority Whip Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), who shepherded the bill to approval.

The final vote after a week of debate was 76 to 19, reflecting deep Democratic divisions. Southern Democrats consistently voted with Republicans on most of 12 unsuccessful efforts to restrict aid.

Reagan has insisted that Salvadoran armed forces need the money before the end of this month in order to guarantee a secure presidential runoff election.

But the appropriations bill faces stiff resistance in the Democratic-dominated House, and Congress is scheduled to begin a week-long Easter recess at the end of next week.

Administration officials have left open the possibility that they will use special emergency authority to bypass Congress and send the funds if the House fails to act before next Friday.

The House has voted twice to kill aid to Nicaraguan rebels, and critics of administration policy there say that sentiment is largely unchanged. In addition, the Senate measure is a grab bag of unrelated funding efforts that will not speed passage.

Aside from the bill's original purpose, the widely backed \$50 million in food aid for Africa, trimmings include \$5 billion in Commodity Credit Corp. export credit guarantees, permission for oil company mergers to continue pending hearings, \$3.4 million for a Pennsylvania school district, \$25 million for Customs Service aircraft and \$70 million for the Public Broadcasting Service.

Critics' only major victory was by voice vote on an amendment to ban Salvadoran aid if its incoming president is prevented from taking office or overthrown in a military coup.

The critics mustered their highest vote total of the debate yesterday in losing, 50 to 44, on a proposal by Sen. Jim Sasser (D-Tenn.) to bar military "operations and maintenance funds" from use in constructing permanent installations in Honduras.

An amendment from Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.) to deny U.S. funding to any Central American groups trying to overthrow a government lost, 51 to 44.

The administration won such bipartisan support with its early decision to trim an original \$92.7 million request for El Salvador. The opportunity came in an offer from Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii), whose subsequent defense of the measure defused much Democratic opposition. He said he had acted to prevent passage of the full \$92.7 million request.

Another factor was a decision by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), not previously a major participant in Central America debate, to take up the issue with a vengeance. He prepared 13 crippling amendments and delivered some of the most passionate oratory.

Swift White House action to calm fears of possible changes in U.S. policy in Nicaragua, raised in a New York Times interview with Reagan last week, also minimized opposition on that issue.

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) demanded and received a letter from Reagan to Majority Leader Howard H. Baker Jr. (R-Tenn.) that explained the policy to Moynihan's satisfaction, and he voted for final passage.

"We now have for the first time an explicit presidential statement about his objectives," Moynihan said later. "I don't think there's any precedent for such a letter."

The letter said the United States "does not seek to destabilize or overthrow the government of Nicaragua" but "only, among other things, to bring the [governing] Sandinistas into meaningful negotiations... on peace in the region" and "cease to involve itself in the internal or external affairs of its neighbors."

Moynihan said on the Senate floor that he had been told the phrase "other things" referred to "those reasons included in presidential findings to the intelligence committees and nothing more."

Other sources said Reagan's first draft of the letter included as objectives a change in the Nicaraguan relationship with the Soviet Union and an end to its arms buildup, internal matters going far beyond the president's stated goals for his policy of covert aid to the rebels.